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UNITED STATES NATIONAL INTERESTS IN THE PERSIAN GULF

BY

COMMANDER MICHAEL S. DIXON

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UNITED STATES NATIONAL INTERESTS IN THE PERSIAN GULF

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

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For the last decade, U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf has been shaped by the Gulf War. With the cease-fire between Iran and Iraq in place and an end to open hostilities in the region, a review of the U.S. national interests in the Persian Gulf and policies aimed at protecting those interests may be in order. The purpose of this study is to identify current U.S. national interests in the Persian Gulf; examine the problems which developed as a result of U.S. ties with the Shah of Iran and what that experience implies for future policy; identify threats to Persian Gulf interests; examine available options for protecting those interests and recommend the policy which best serves that purpose.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	11
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Persian Gulf.....	1
Oil Reserves.....	2
Western Security.....	2
2. THREATS TO PERSIAN GULF INTERESTS.....	5
The Challenge.....	5
Use of a Regional Friend.....	5
Threats to Persian Gulf Oil.....	8
Embargoes and Quotas.....	8
Threat of Hostilities.....	11
Interdiction of Oil Exports at Sea.....	12
Are Pipelines Vulnerable?.....	13
Destruction of Producing Facilities.....	14
3. PROTECTING U.S. INTEREST IN THE PERSIAN GULF.....	19
Has U.S. Presence Been Effective?.....	19
Options for Protecting U.S. Interests.....	20
Composition of Naval Forces.....	21
Ramifications.....	23
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	24

Chapter 1: Introduction

Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf is a relatively small, shallow body of salt water which separates Iran on the northeast from the Arabian Peninsula on the southwest. From the Strait of Hormuz- a passage about twenty-five miles wide from the North Arabian Sea which runs between Iran and Oman- the Gulf measures about six hundred miles to the mouth of the Shatt-al-Arab, the river formed by the meeting of the Tigris and Euphrates.¹ In addition to Iran whose western coast forms the east littoral, seven Arab states border the Gulf on the west, Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq.

Most Americans would describe the Persian Gulf as a forbidding place with an inhospitable climate. During the summer months, temperatures at sea frequently exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit and the humidity-laden air often forms a dense haze which limits visibility to less than four miles. Poisonous sea snakes and large jelly fish populate the warm shallow waters and winds carry desert sand for miles across the Gulf.

Despite this popular and mostly accurate perception, the Persian Gulf is a dynamic area with a history rich in significant events. Mesopotamia existed in what is roughly now Iraq; Cyrus the Great established the Persian Empire as the preeminent power of the world 500 years before the birth of Christ; and the Prophet Mohammed founded Islam in Saudi Arabia during the 7th century A.D. And now 2000 years later, the Persian Gulf is once more the focus of historic events as control of vast amounts of the world's oil reserves has made the gulf oil-producing states critical players in the world's economy.

Oil Reserves

As much as seventy percent of the world's proven oil reserves may be located under the gulf region and twenty-five percent of the oil traded on today's world market is produced there.² Saudi Arabia with proven oil reserves totaling 252 billion barrels possesses the world's largest oil supply, followed by Iraq with 100 billion,³ Kuwait with 94 billion, Iran with 92.8 billion and Abu Dhabi of the United Arab Emirates with 92.2 billion. Estimated U.S. and Soviet reserves are 25 and 59 billion barrels, respectively.⁴ Gulf oil accounts for sixty percent of the oil consumed by Japan and thirty percent of that imported by Western European countries. The U.S. currently imports less than ten percent of its oil needs from the gulf area, but, this figure had been rising annually since 1980.⁵ Given the availability of oil on the market, the current market price and the relatively low recovery cost of Persian Gulf oil, U.S. preference for gulf oil will most likely continue to increase and could conceivably double over the next few years.

Western Security

A quick look at the relative dependence on gulf oil seems to indicate that the United States would lose little should the gulf oil market be disrupted or closed. Japan would be the biggest loser. Following that train of thought, one could argue that the United States, which possesses substantial oil reserves and access to Mexican and South American oil, might even benefit from an oil cut off, in so much as this would hike Japanese

energy costs.

In fact, interruption of oil flow to Japan would have an immediate adverse impact on the United States. As Japan lost its access to gulf oil, it would be forced to search elsewhere, thus bidding up the price of oil available on the market. This would send prices in the U.S. sky-rocketing and the ensuing inflation would certainly damage the U.S. economy.

Given the close interrelatedness of the Western economic system, access to Persian Gulf oil is clearly a vital U.S. national interest.⁷ Moreover, U.S. economic interests in the gulf region extend beyond the area to include economic markets and available investment capital generated by the gulf oil industry. One can even argue that the economic health of the United States and its partners in the Western alliance is crucially dependent on Saudi investment in their economies. Along with that the West benefits from diversification of the gulf oil states' petroleum industry. Given this state of affairs, the conclusion is inescapable that the gulf, now and the foreseeable future, is an area of vital interest to the U.S.

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Chapter 2: Threats To Persian Gulf Interests

The Challenge

The United Nations' sponsored cease fire between Iran and Iraq has clearly diminished the threat to Persian Gulf oil. However, so critical has gulf oil become to the economic health of the free world that, even with an end to the Gulf War, protecting the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf must remain a long term U.S. national objective. The challenge of protecting U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf has been faced by every U.S. president since the post World War II era. Although the focus has shifted somewhat from preventing Soviet expansion to protecting oil, the basic challenge remains the same. How does the U.S. effectively provide for long term protection of its interests in an area as geographically and culturally distant as the Persian Gulf?

Use of a Regional Friend

U.S. Persian Gulf Policy from the late forties through 1978 was aimed at developing close ties and interdependence between the U.S. and Iran. In effect, for almost three decades the U.S. supported the Shah of Iran as a regional friend or surrogate who protected U.S. national interests in the Persian Gulf region. The use of a surrogate may be a viable method of protecting national interests in some areas. However, a brief review of the relationship between the U.S. and the Shah of Iran will demonstrate why the

surrogate option is not a realistic one in the Persian Gulf.

To say the relationship between the U.S. and Iran terminated in disaster would be an understatement. The Islamic Revolution which followed Khomeini's return, the storming of the American Embassy in Teheran and the prolonged hostage crisis were well publicized events which badly damaged America's image in the world. This is not to say the United States was not in a large part responsible for the debacle faced by the Carter Administration. Indeed, it is possible to argue that difficulties encountered were inherent in the surrogate relationship.

U.S. policy that supported the Shah as a regional surrogate failed for three basic reasons. One, the 1953 CIA sponsored coup which restored the Shah and ousted the popular reformist, Dr. Mohammed Mossadeq, was perceived by the Iranians as an imperialist plot.¹ From an Iranian perspective, American attempts to colonize Iran continued through the Kennedy and Nixon administrations. In respect to Kennedy, the Iranians viewed the Shah's 1960 reforms as undertaken at Kennedy's behest. Hence when the reforms curtailed privileges enjoyed by Iran's clerics, the religious leaders directed their anger at America.² As for Nixon, Iranians resented the enormous sums the Shah spent on United States weapons under the Nixon Doctrine. Many Iranians believed these purchases were made solely for the purpose of buoying the American economy during a period of extreme financial crisis.³

Two, over-exposure of Iranians to the lifestyle of Americans. The modernization of Iran's military in order to perform its peacekeeping role brought large numbers of American advisors and technicians to Iran in the late sixties and early seventies. The presence of this growing number of Americans produced strains within Iran's traditional society. The practice of using alcohol and dressing casually was regarded as improper by the fundamentalist

Iranians. Additionally, many of the American workers were granted extraterritorial status. This infuriated a large portion of the population which saw no reason for the foreign workers to be governed outside Iranian law. Further, unemployment was a significant urban problem and the well paid Americans were viewed as taking jobs which rightfully belonged to Iranians.⁴

And three, the youthfulness of Iran's population was a factor in generating anti-Americanism, since youth were most susceptible to Khomeini's propaganda attacks. The median age of Iran's 33 million people in 1976 was sixteen and a half.⁵

Without debating the propriety or effectiveness of U.S. Persian Gulf policy, one clear lesson can be drawn. American presence caused resentment and gave offense to the Iranian Muslims with the result that positive contributions by America to Iran were completely undermined. It seems reasonable to assume that the Arab gulf states, having witnessed the events in neighboring Iran, have absorbed this lesson. As a result, we are not likely to find a nation willing to play the surrogate role as did Iran under the Shah.

Moreover, even if a gulf state were interested, it is not likely any could fill the role. Iraq possesses the military capability. However, relations between it and Washington have hardly progressed to the point where Iraq could be considered a regional friend. Additionally, Iraq has maintained a friendly posture with the Soviets and relies upon them as a primary arms supplier. Nor is Saudi Arabia a possibility. Although a long standing friend, Saudi Arabia does not have the resources required to police the gulf. In fact, Saudi Arabia has difficulty providing for its own security. The Saudis are out gunned and out numbered almost three to one by Iraq and the House of Saud has more than its fair share of internal problems including its

own large complement of Islamic fundamentalists. Even the Gulf Cooperation Council composed of Saudi Arabia and five smaller states would be incapable of protecting U.S. interests. The lack of a viable military capability among the GCC states notwithstanding, the tenets upon which the GCC was established specifically reject intervention by a foreign power in the affairs of the region.⁶ Even though the GCC states welcomed the U.S. presence in support of their interests during the Gulf War, the foundation upon which their organization is built would not support acting in behalf of the U.S.

Without a friendly regional power in the area willing and/or capable of protecting U.S. interests, reliance on surrogates must be ruled out.

Threats to Persian Gulf Oil

Persian Gulf oil can be threatened in two general ways. The first involves intentional economic or political manipulation of the oil supply by means of production quotas or embargoes enacted by the oil producers. The second entails disruption of distribution by destruction of producing facilities or interdiction along export routes as the result of hostilities directed at or between gulf oil producing states. Access to Persian Gulf oil has been threatened by each of these methods in recent years. The Oil Embargo of 1973 and subsequent production quotas established by OPEC which artificially raised the price of oil,⁷ and the tanker war conducted by Iraq and Iran are examples.⁸

Embargoes and Quotas

The Oil Embargo of 1973 was an attempt by the Arab oil producing nations

led by Saudi Arabia to withhold their major economic resource, oil, as a means of pressuring the oil consuming nations in order to make them withdraw support for Israel during the 1973 Arab Israeli War. The embargo lasted from October 1973 until March 1974.⁹ Following the embargo, the OPEC nations, again under Saudi Arabia's leadership, attempted to manipulate the price of oil by imposing production quotas on member nations. Saudi Arabia, in effect, became the controlling agency as the "swing producer." When world reserves were growing and threatening oil prices, Saudi Arabia would cut production to bring reserves down and keep prices high. Conversely, when supply was low and prices were up, Saudi oil production would pick up to meet the demand.¹⁰ The combination of the embargo and production quotas generally worked against U.S. interests and on occasions severely impinged on the U.S. economy. Between 1973 and 1974, the price of crude oil quadrupled. This resulted in an inflationary period which lasted through the Carter years.

Production quotas and embargoes are often dismissed as non threatening given today's oil market. In January 1989, former U.S. Energy Secretary, John S. Herrington, stated publicly that he believed OPEC would continue to decline in importance. The current oil glut and the tendency of the OPEC nations to over produce are cited in this connection.¹² Many also believe that the need for oil revenues in Iran and Iraq will help to keep oil supplies high and prices low.¹³ In the short term this may be true. However, a measure of caution must be applied before dismissing this situation as non- threatening. The oil glut on today's market is due in part to actions taken by the Saudis to regain control of the market.

From 1973 to 1979, Saudi Arabia controlled the price of oil on the world market by establishing a "marker" or premium price for its Arabian light crude.¹⁴ OPEC members used the "marker" to negotiate a price for their oil.

Over pricing and over production were kept in check by the Saudis. Oil consumers could avoid over pricing by drawing their requirements from the huge Saudi Arabian reserves. Demands in excess of OPEC quotas were also supplied from Saudi reserves.¹⁵ Despite the early success in manipulating oil prices, Saudi Arabia lost control of the market in 1979.¹⁶

Following the Islamic Revolution, Iran's oil production dropped by 3 to 4 million barrels a day.¹⁷ Saudi Arabia was unable to sustain production at a level required to supply world demand.¹⁸ As a result, oil prices began rising and reached record heights by 1981.¹⁹ When the OPEC pricing mechanism failed, Saudi Arabia lost control of the oil market.²⁰ The elevated oil prices made increased production in areas such as Mexico, South America, United States and the North Sea profitable. At the same time, oil importing nations implemented conservation efforts and turned to alternate energy sources such as coal and natural gas in order to reduce dependence on OPEC oil.²¹ The combination of these efforts reduced world oil consumption by more than 11% between 1979 and 1983.²² Further, many OPEC nations exceeded production quotas in order to bolster oil revenues. The result was an oil glut which forced Saudi Arabia to drastically reduce oil production in order to maintain relatively high oil prices. In 1985, Saudi oil production had reached a 20 year low.²³

Then in 1986, frustrated by falling revenues, Saudi Arabia abandoned its role as swing producer and stepped up oil production to capture a "fair share" of the market.²⁴ Since taking this action, the Saudis have gained control of the oil market and prices have stabilized well below the 1981 highs. However, some analysts suspect Saudi Arabia of driving down oil prices in order to force non-OPEC producers with high production costs out of business.²⁵ Although not successful to date, three indicators point toward revival of OPEC with Saudi Arabia at the helm. One, at current consumption rates most of the

non-OPEC reserves will be depleted before the year 2000. Two, current prices and available oil have encouraged consumption and have reversed conservation trends. And three, low oil prices have discouraged development of alternate energy sources.²⁶ The implication being the eventual return of a strong OPEC cartel with absolute control over the world oil market.

The above suggests the need for an economic coalition of oil importing nations. Two such organizations already exist, the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The Paris based IEA manages an oil sharing program which would support any member nation which experienced a 7% disruption of its oil supply by drawing from the reserves of other member nations. The U.S. and the other major industrialized Western nations are members of this organization. The OECD is a similar organization with a membership comprised of the twenty-four leading oil consuming nations. As of 1987, OECD members had accumulated 3 billion barrels or a six month supply in government oil reserves and company stock sites. This represents a free world increase in oil reserves some twenty fold since 1979.²⁷ Organizations such as the IEA and OECD currently provide a measure of protection and some flexibility with respect to today's threat. Long term policy must encourage expansion along these lines and increase unity among the oil consuming nations.

Threat of Hostilities

Perhaps the more likely near-term threat to Persian Gulf oil is disruption of flow as the result of hostilities directed at or between gulf oil producing states. Hostile acts could be directed at oil exports along transit routes such as the Persian Gulf/Strait of Hormuz sea lines of

communications or pipelines. Or, they could be directed specifically at oil producing facilities.

Interdiction of Oil Exports at Sea

Interdiction of oil exports seems a likely objective in a military campaign against an oil producing gulf state. In mid 1987, 7.5 million barrels of the 9.5 million exported daily passed through the Strait of Hormuz. Closing the strait at that time would have meant a 9% daily reduction in the oil available on the free market. Assuming gulf oil exports remain constant, planned pipeline construction could reverse these figures by 1998.²⁸ However, it seems more likely that use of the sea lanes for oil export will actually increase. This judgement is based upon the over abundance of commercial shipping, the ease of transporting oil through the Strait of Hormuz and the fact that at present Iran has no other convenient avenue for moving its oil to the world market. Therefore, the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz are likely to remain important oil avenues.

During the Gulf War, both Iran and Iraq attempted to control or limit oil exportation and shipping in an effort to gain an economic advantage. Iraq used tactical air assets to attack Iranian oil shipping primarily in the northeast area of the gulf and Iran attempted to control the Strait of Hormuz with small boat attacks on Arabian shipping and threatened use of Silkworm missiles. This became known as the highly publicized "tanker war". In August 1986, the tanker war was escalated by both sides and more than a dozen merchant ships were attacked that month killing 30 seaman.²⁹ As a result, significant numbers of merchant seaman refused to sail through the Straits of Hormuz and insurance cost for gulf shipping became prohibitively high.³⁰ This

prompted a response from the European allies who joined with the U.S. Naval ships to ensure freedom of navigation within the Gulf.

Despite their efforts, however neither Iran nor Iraq succeeded in reducing oil flow through interdiction along sea routes. In fact, less than 1% of the gulf shipping was attacked during the war and most of those attacked were damaged rather than sunk.³¹ The lack of success by Iran and Iraq points up the difficulties in this area but certainly does not rule out such attacks at a future date. The lack of adequate Iranian and Iraqi forces and equipment probably limited their success in this area even more than the allied Naval presence. However, this will certainly not be so in the future. Arms proliferation in the gulf area will significantly change the nature of this threat. Iran will likely over arm in the wake of the devastating Gulf War and Iraq will most likely continue to equip with modern military hardware. Therefore this must be a consideration in providing for protection of Persian Gulf interests.

Are Pipelines Vulnerable?

Pipelines are becoming increasingly attractive to the gulf oil producing states. Both Iraq and Saudi Arabia expanded their pipeline networks during the Gulf War. Pipeline networks provide these nations with tremendous flexibility and offer a means to export their oil when the traditional sea routes are not available as is the current case with Iraq.

At first glance, the miles of pipeline look like vulnerable targets. However, significant long term disruption of oil flow by interdiction of a pipeline is not easily accomplished. Pipelines are easy to locate and easily damaged if accessible. However, pipelines are usually within friendly

borders and not readily accessible to overt enemy operations.

Much like railways, pipelines can be easily damaged by small covert operations. But, such damage could be quickly repaired. In response to hostilities, security could be stepped up and mobile repair teams could be employed to limit and repair the effects of damage. Even air attacks against pipelines would produce limited results. Compared to damages large scale air strike might cause to producing facilities, pipeline damage would seem insignificant.

Additionally, pipelines offer producers with diverse networks the option to limit pumping via a route which is threatened as Iraq has done with the Syrian pipeline. Further, significant disruption of flow over a long period would require coordinated attack and large scale damage throughout the Persian Gulf pipeline network. This is not a likely event. Even if it were, the U.S. could do very little to prevent it unless assistance was requested by the Arab Gulf States.

Destruction of Producing Facilities

The most significant threat to Persian Gulf oil lies in the ability of the major gulf states, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, to strike at one another's oil producing facilities. During recent years, these three states have made significant additions to their ballistic missile inventories and both Saudi Arabia and Iraq possess a credible tactical air capability. Despite the Iran-Iraq cease fire, much hostility and tension remains in the region and these nations will probably add to their already large arsenals of weapons.

Iran can certainly build a case to support the need for additional arms. The cost of eight years of war with Iraq is estimated at \$450 billion. The

war destroyed 4,000 villages 14 major cities and as many as 50 additional cities including Teheran suffered significant damage.³² Iraq demonstrated a ruthless willingness to employ its weapons arsenal against Iran, including the use of chemical weapons. Iran's response to Iraqi aggression was limited to an extent by lack of a weapons inventory. Against this back drop Saudi Arabia will most likely continue its recent trend of military purchases. Short of an unexpected agreement of cooperation among these three states, the arms buildup will undoubtedly continue.

Animosity in the region is certainly not lacking and any one of a number of scenarios might lead to an escalating weapons exchange which could very significantly affect the oil industry. For instance, the Shatt-al-Arab which has been clogged by war-damaged tankers will require a significant dredging and obstacle clearing effort to restore Iraq's deep water access to the Persian Gulf.³³ But, cleanup cannot commence without Iran's agreement and that is not likely to be forthcoming. In order to restore its Persian Gulf shipping, Iraq has expressed an interest in developing its only Persian Gulf port of Umm Qasr. Deep water access, however, would require extensive dredging around and control of the Kuwaiti owned island of Warbah.³⁴ Should Kuwait fail to concede control of Warbah to Iraq, Middle East watchers have indicated that Iraq might take the island by force. Such action could easily lead to an exchange which could significantly reduce the flow of Gulf oil.

However unlikely any such scenario might seem, in 1978 probably not one Western gulf oil importer would have predicted a war between Iran and Iraq which would last eight years and kill or maim hundreds of thousands of gulf citizens.

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Chapter 3: Protecting U.S Interest In the Gulf

Has U.S. Presence Been Effective?

Protection of U.S. interests over the last decade has been primarily a military task shaped by the Iran Iraq War. A direct U.S. presence, primarily a Naval presence, has been employed since the break with Iran in 1979. This presence appears to have been effective. The Persian Gulf region has not come under the domination of a hostile power nor have the hostilities between Iran and Iraq critically impeded the flow of oil. However, despite the prolonged U.S. influence in the region which included a Carrier Battle Group (CVBG) in the North Arabian Sea, a large Surface Action Group (SAG) in the gulf, escort of the reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, the AWACS operation in Saudi Arabia and the decision in the summer of 1987 to offer U.S. protection to all neutral gulf shipping, most of the Arab states are still reluctant to associate freely and directly with the U.S. forces.

With the exception of some emergency and contingency agreements, the Saudis have not made overt gestures indicating a willingness to provide support for U.S. gulf forces.

Through formal agreement, Oman has provided some support including limited use of Omani military facilities.¹ However, Omani patrol boats routinely challenge U.S. warships in the Strait of Hormuz by warning them away from Omani territorial waters over marine band radio circuits. Kuwait has indicated that the U.S. presence in the Gulf is no longer required now that open hostilities between Iraq and Iran have ended. Even during escort operations involving reflagged Kuwaiti tankers, direct association of U.S. Naval forces with Kuwait was avoided.

Bahrain, with the Mina Sulman port facilities of Manama and the Administrative Support Unit (ASU) has been the exception in providing long term overt support. However, Bahrain is a special case. A small country with a limited oil supply, Bahrain is virtually dependent upon the U.S. for its defense. In 1979, Iran's revolutionary leadership renewed interest in its territorial claim to Bahrain. Bahrain's independence from Iran dates from the late 18th century and was substantiated by a popular vote in 1969. However, with a Shi'a faction which comprises about 75% of its population, Bahrain is particularly vulnerable to Iran's Islamic fundamentalism and in 1981 thwarted a Shi'a coup.² For this reason, U.S. military support is tactfully courted and graciously accepted at the highest political levels. However, the lack of acceptance of U.S. servicemen among the Bahraini population indicates that underlying tensions which prevent other Arab nations from providing the same type of support are brewing within Bahrain.

The perception among the Arab gulf states is that the U.S. presence during the Gulf War was in support of U.S. interests and any security benefits they realized were coincidental.³ This coupled with the frustrations experienced by the Arab governments when dealing with the decidedly pro-Israeli U.S. congress seems to indicate that the support base within the gulf is not likely to improve.⁴

Options for Protecting U.S. Interests

Given the limited support available and the lack of a regional state to act in behalf of the U.S., options for protecting U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf are limited. The use of a multinational maritime patrol may seem appropriate considering the dependence of the European allies and Japan on

Persian Gulf oil. However, the only nations capable of sustaining a significant force in the gulf indefinitely are the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The European naval buildup during the later stages of the Gulf War, with the exception of mine counter measure platforms, was more a sign of western unity than a significant increase in force capability.

A joint U.S. Soviet maritime patrol is not worthy of serious consideration. Problems such as command and control notwithstanding, providing the Soviets with the mission of protecting U.S. interests in a region where so much effort has been expended to limit their influence would be counter productive. The only viable option for protecting U.S. Persian Gulf interests is the presence of a credible U.S. Naval force.

Composition of Naval Forces

The massive U.S. Naval buildup in response to threats posed by the Gulf War, may no longer be required. U.S. ships now provide surveillance rather than escort for U.S. flagged ships and, absent open hostilities, limited resources may better be utilized elsewhere. Besides, the expense of maintaining a Carrier Battle Group (CVBG) and a large Surface Action Group (SAG) in the region indefinitely would be prohibitive.

However, a tailored reduction of forces to meet the current threat requires acknowledgement of several prerequisites. One, a small naval presence would provide a credible deterrence only if a large force with significant escalatory strike capability were available to deploy into the region on short notice. Two, forces left in the gulf must have the capability of defending themselves and the COMMIDEASTFOR flagship. Three, force size must be sufficient to provide ample off-line time for ships to conduct

essential maintenance and provide crew rest. Four, surveillance and intelligence gathering assets must be available within the force to support the mission of protecting U.S. national interests as well as providing warning for self defense. Finally, supply support must be available to sustain the force.

Properly tailored, a small flotilla in addition to the COMMIDEASTFOR flagship could establish a credible presence within the Persian Gulf. However, its success would be dependent upon U.S. resolve to employ the large follow-on force should the need arise. Considering the commitment of U.S. forces during the Gulf War, this resolve should not be difficult to establish. The Carrier Battle Group would provide the back bone of the follow-on force and must be available within a reasonable period, seven or ten days at most. Since at least one Carrier Battle Group (CVBG) has been deployed to the North Arabian Sea for the last several years, standing-down the group to a Mediterranean or Pacific Fleet area should not present a scheduling problem. In fact, positioning the Battle Group in a area where maintenance and support are more readily available would enhance fleet readiness. In addition to the carrier Battle Group, a Marine Expeditionary Force and the required MPS ships could be available in the region within the same time frame.⁵

A small Naval flotilla could be specifically tailored to operate in a low intensity conflict environment. A small number of strike helicopters, a special forces element which includes a Navy Seal team, mine countermeasure ships and a small number of amphibious ships from which these forces could be employed as well as a destroyer squadron and one cruiser would be required at a minimum. Equipping the flotilla with nontraditional systems such as heavily armed speed boats which could be launched from an amphibious ship would be beneficial and should be investigated. If the large follow-on force is

designed to deter or counter overt aggression against U.S. interests in the region, a specialized flotilla capable of conducting anti-terrorist activities and small scale guerilla warfare could effectively protect U.S. Persian Gulf interests from terrorist or small scale intervention.

Limitations

Reducing force size in the Persian Gulf does have several drawbacks. A smaller force provides less flexibility for day to day operations and limits the range of immediate responses available for contingencies. Additionally, a potential antagonist might be prone to look more closely for opportunities for revenge or actions which might embarrass the U.S. However, from an economy of force perspective, the small specialized force provides the best option considering the current threat. Iran, devastated by the war with Iraq is not an immediate threat to the balance of power in the gulf. The Tanker War ended with the Iran-Iraq cease-fire and oil shipping can now navigate throughout the gulf without the fear of indiscriminate attack. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan implies that armed Soviet aggression is not an immediate threat. Thus, current threats to U.S. interests have become less defined. They exist as potential threats rather than stated or demonstrated hostile intentions. Future threats will evolve and change as the gulf states redefine national and economic interests. Maintaining forces on hand to respond to every contingency may prove impossible.

Even with a large force, contingency requirements may develop for which the proper blend of capabilities is not available. The scenario which sees Iraq invade Kuwait to gain control of Warbah Island serves as an excellent example. Assuming that Kuwait would request U.S. assistance, options are

limited. The absence of ground based forces in the area implies that initial response should be Naval and Marine. Even if a large amphibious battle group where available in the A.O., immediate employment of those forces may not be possible. Arrival of prepositioned equipment, distribution of tasking and coordination orders, lack of intelligence or improper force mixes such as lack of a mine counter measure capability may delay a response. Although more difficult for planners and those coordinating such an operation, the use of an over the horizon or follow-on force in response to such a scenario would be at least as effective as an immediate response from a large prepositioned force.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas L. McNaugher, "The Limits of Projecting U.S. Forces to the Persian Gulf," in U.S. Strategic Interests in the Gulf Region, ed. by William J. Olson, p. 173.
2. Martin, pp. 1-13.
3. Cooper, p. 568.
4. J.E. Peterson, "The United States and the Gulf: A Fraying Relationships," Middle East Insight, Winter 1989, p.48.
5. McNaugher, p. 179.

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173-187: "The Limits of Projecting U.S. Forces to the Persian Gulf," by Thomas L. McNaugher.

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